

On Activists and Community-Based Organizations

by *Jonathan Tarleton*
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To mark the fifth anniversary of the launch of *Urban Omnibus*, we look at themes that have emerged in our content over time and think about what those threads reveal about the needs, desires, and priorities of the city today.

When *Urban Omnibus* launched in 2009, among its primary goals was to feature projects in the words of the practitioners behind them. To that end, we frequently highlight the work of activists and community-based organizations tackling a range of issues in New York's neighborhoods. And while these initiatives may be place-based, in each we seek to draw out lessons that are widely applicable far beyond our boroughs. What arises is a portrait of how change at varying scales — neighborhood, city, state, and nation — is made by a dedicated corps of activists hailing from a variety of fields.



The Occupy Sandy hub at the Church of St. Luke and St. Matthew at 520 Clinton Avenue in Brooklyn | Photo by [Matt Richter](#)

From Zuccotti Park to Tahrir Square to Independence Square, public expression of discontent and popular mobilization against corrupt regimes continues to rumble across the world, primarily in [spaces of public assembly](#). As far as activist groups go, Occupy Wall Street may entertain more notoriety than any other in recent years. And while the movement's occupation of privately owned public space certainly provoked discussion about our democracy, a branch that sprung in its aftermath has arguably had a much clearer impact in the life of New York City. Occupy Sandy sought to put into practice some of the principles at the heart of OWS in responding to the devastation of the hurricane, primarily that of mutual aid. And as Adam Greenfield describes in his [analysis of Occupy Sandy's operations](#), it proved very adept at distributing a massive volume of volunteers, donations, and contributions while other, more traditional aid organizations were slow to begin direct work in affected communities.

Recovery work continues, specifically in navigating the physical rebuilding of neighborhoods and homes. And with affordable housing central to Mayor de Blasio's agenda to counter rising inequality in the city, work surrounding the provision of affordable, safe, and dignified housing is particularly worthy of study. The [Urban Homesteading Assistance Board](#) (UHAB) was formed during the urban crisis of the 70s to help residents create shared-equity housing cooperatives out of neglected and deserted properties. Adapting to the shifting challenges of New York City — away from derelict properties and to unaffordability — UHAB continues to work as a tenant organizer, technical assistance provider, home ownership trainer, public advocate, facilitator of financing and insurance, and even as a property developer. [WHEDco](#), a community development organization in the Bronx, approaches housing in the context of the wider community, pairing affordable housing construction with access to health services and recruitment of retailers to empty storefronts. And this holistic vision extends, as founder and president Nancy Biberman notes, to promoting and preserving the rich cultural history of the area, thereby fostering pride and ownership among residents.



Urban Horizons Economic Development Center — developed by WHEDco — includes housing, healthcare services, and a commercial food incubator. The building was formerly Morrisania Hospital. | Photo courtesy of [Lehman College, CUNY](#)

The housing struggle does not only encompass building new affordable housing. As Seema Agnani of Chhaya explains, [bringing basement units currently illegal under New York City housing code into the formal housing realm](#) would not only improve tenants' living conditions and formalize a source of affordable housing, it could also increase city revenues as landlords report the rental income from the units. To this end, Chhaya advocates for the creation of an Accessory Dwelling Unit code and design assistance in adapting the basements to meet health and safety standards. Preservation of affordable housing was at the core of the Center for Urban Pedagogy and Tenants & Neighbors collaboration on a pamphlet explaining [predatory equity](#) — the practice in which speculators aggressively buy up buildings covered by government programs that keep rents affordable, evict tenants, convert them into market-rate housing, and resell the building for a hefty profit. By providing a visual explanation of the practice, the groups hoped to mobilize affected tenants and convince decision-makers to take action against it.

Such design can be a very effective tool for social change, but design services frequently prove out of the financial reach of community-based organizations. DesigNYC connects design professionals to groups working on social issues to bridge this divide. One such partnership, between the El Puente Green Light District and designer Farzana Gandhi, resulted in [el Timbiriche](#), a mobile health and wellness unit that draws on community traditions of healing in Williamsburg to promote wellness in the neighborhood. Beyond design, activism through art — sometimes referred to as social practice — is a growing movement in the broader art world. The move from “representation to participation” was the subject of a [Creative Time exhibition](#) in 2011. The Queens Museum is a leader in this realm, effectively blending art with organizing to support local institutions through its [Corona Studios project](#). And artists are often in need of support themselves as they face a dearth of affordable space to live and work. And [Esther Robinson](#), through her organization ArtHome, supports artists' work by giving them tools to build assets and equity through financial literacy, homeownership, self-sufficiency, and the responsible use of credit.



A Red Hook WiFi router serving Coffey Park, attached to an antenna | Photo by Jonathan Baldwin

Physical interventions in the city can often be the most tangible result of organizing work. [Planning Corps](#) is a group of volunteer planners and citizens. They set in motion a process to remake Queens Boulevard into a safer streetscape for a more diverse body of users. Kerri Culhane of Two Bridges Community Council is working to implement a plan to bring [green infrastructure to Two Bridges](#) as a way to use the open space of towers-in-the-park developments more effectively in stormwater management. And Amanda Schachter and Alexander Levi of SLO Architecture are collaborating with local groups and communities in the creation of the [Bronx River Greenway](#). Their plans include repurposing of an architecturally significant, unused train terminal as a point of connection to an isolated park along the river, part of a broader push to create more public space and re-take the river as a community node. In Red Hook, a neighborhood contending with both a physical disconnect from the rest of the city and social divides within, the Red Hook Initiative and the Open Technology Institute have partnered to create a locally-based WiFi network. [Red Hook WiFi](#) seeks to bridge those divides through youth capacity building, community-based applications, and resilient infrastructure that allows for truly local communication with benefits beyond the virtual network. While all of this work speaks to the importance of tailoring efforts to local context, its resonance extends far beyond one neighborhood or city — we hope you're as inspired as we are.

Jonathan Tarleton is a writer, activist, and urbanist with aspirations to contribute to a more sustainable and inclusive urban environment. He is an assistant editor at The Architectural League and has made his way to Brooklyn from his roots in Georgia and North Carolina.